

THE FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAM
MATHEMATICS GED MANUAL

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An Integrative Service Project Summary submitted to the University of Utah in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Service-Learning Scholars' Program through the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center

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April 2010

Introduction

This project began when the Housing Authority of the County of Salt Lake (HACSL) contacted the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center for assistance with its new Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) Program. The FSS program seeks to help highly-motivated adults in low income, government housing obtain their GEDs. Historically, mathematics has been the hardest subject for the program's participants, therefore they were looking for University of Utah volunteer math tutors. I chose to assist with this program, first, because I have always loved math and worked as a math tutor throughout high school. Second, I was also interested in the psychological, social and economic issues surrounding adults who had, for various reasons, been unable to complete their high school education.

Background

The 2000 United States Census found that 40 million American adults had not graduated from high school. In the following years, between 2001 and 2005, only 2.2 million adults successfully passed the GED (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). This suggests a greater need for support programs to advocate the GED and enable adults to study for and pass the exam. Jill Siegel, a GED educator in Brooklyn, NY has found that many challenges arise while helping young adults prepare for the GED, "They often have negative attitudes toward what they perceive as an educational institution whose purpose is at odds with their everyday experience" (Siegel, 2007). Meanwhile, in her observations of the Women's Community Education Program in New Jersey, Dr. Alisa Belzer found that GED educators are challenged by the vast array of previous educational experiences brought to the table in their classrooms. Some students regard traditional education positively, and would prefer that their GED education mirror traditional models. Other students have had negative traditional education experiences and prefer more 'adult' models of

learning. Says one participant, "It's not like normal school where...you got homework, you got certain things you gotta do on the board and everything. It's more adult, one-on-one, woman to woman education" (Belzer 2004)

To counter this problem in her program, Siegel chooses to use "activities that contextualize education within the lives of [her] students," e.g., to build their writing skills, she encourages them to write about their own lives and current events that matter to them. She suggests that these activities are "legitimately academic," but do not follow traditional education models, thus satisfying most students (Siegel, 2007).

Procedure

I became aware of the HACSL's desire to be involved with the Bennion Center three days before the annual Choices Brochure was to be published. The Choices Brochure lists all of the Bennion Center's volunteer opportunities and is an integral volunteer recruitment tool. Therefore, for this program to be successful within the Bennion Center, I felt that it was imperative to include a program description in the Choices Brochure. In the next two days, I met with the HACSL and Bennion Center staff members. With the assistance of HACSL staff, I quickly completed a new program application (Appendix A). Staff and student leaders then reviewed the application in an impromptu meeting and approved the program. In discussion with the HACSL, we determined that their biggest need was tutor support. Second to that, HACSL staff felt that their clients would benefit from educational materials to assist them in studying for the math section of the GED. I chose to compile these materials for my Capstone Integrative Service Project.

Results

The first step in developing this program was to recruit University of Utah student volunteers. To do so, I hung numerous flyers across campus (Appendix B), made classroom announcements, discussed the program with several Bennion Center student groups and requested that the psychology and education advising departments send mass emails to their students. These steps were repeated throughout the semester, with marginal success.

Within the first month of the program, I had recruited six volunteers, five of whom attended training at the HACSL office. After we trained these volunteers, HACSL agency managers decided it would be prudent to require that HACSL clients sign waivers, allowing their case managers to release their information to tutors. It took several weeks for these forms to be distributed and returned. After the forms were returned, I attempted to contact the tutors to match them with HACSL clients. Two of our tutors were unresponsive and did not return phone calls or emails. Three agreed to schedule meetings with their tutors. After a few weeks, two were tutoring successfully and one had stopped responding. Two weeks later, one was, and still is, tutoring successfully, the other was tutoring occasionally, but reported 'misunderstandings' with scheduling times. Currently, he is no longer tutoring.

Hoping for 'better luck next time,' I continued recruitment attempts to find more tutors. These attempts resulted in several interested students. When asked to complete the background check form and volunteer application, however, many of these students stopped responding as well. By March, we had three volunteers who were ready to schedule a training with the HACSL. Unfortunately their schedules did not align and the HACSL was not interested in scheduling individual training sessions, likely due to cost and marginal previous success.

In discussion with the HACSL and the Bennion Center, we concluded that we may have had limited success due to the fact that volunteers were uncomfortable contacting their tutoree and meeting in community locations. At the beginning of April, then, in hopes to increase the program's success, we chose to combine it with the Literacy Action Center, a program, housed in the same building as the HACSL. We hope that doing so will provide a safe meeting location and allow tutors to designate set hours in which they are available to tutor. We believe that this will be both beneficial to the tutors as well as HACSL clients. I will continue to work with the programs throughout the summer until someone can be found to take my place.

The GED manual I created will be given to the Literacy Action Center. They will be encouraged to copy and distribute it to their clients and tutors. The manual covers all of the topics covered on the GED according to Kaplan Corporation. I also created a pre-test for tutors to gauge their client's previous mathematical knowledge. This will help both tutors and clients know where to begin in their lessons. A similar post-test was also created to assess success of the program and adequate preparation for the GED exam. I also created a resource list where clients can find real practice tests for the exams. This will allow them to practice within time limits and under testing conditions. In accordance with Beler and Siegel's research, I tried to write the manual in such a way that examples and practice problems were relevant to the clients' lifestyles. I used examples such as rent payments, and garage sale shopping – in an effort to make them feel comfortable with the manual and understand math's relevance to their own lives. I hope that this manual will be useful for the HACSL and the Literacy Action Center in the future.

Reflection

When I began this project, I expected it to be very successful. I was already the program director for hospice care – a well established program. For this program, I had a steady stream of

volunteers, most of whom volunteered without incident. I was shocked by how difficult it was to train and keep volunteers for this program. I think that, to some degree, volunteers were nervous about calling the clients and meeting them in the community – largely due to negative social stigmas. In the future, it will be important to ensure that volunteers are educated about the community they are serving. With hospice care, volunteers do successfully set their own schedules and meet in the community. With this program, however, I think that meeting in the community introduced too much risk and required too much effort from volunteers. Therefore, I believe that blending the FSS program with the Literacy Action Center will be beneficial for the program and future tutors. This will allow for the creation of set schedules and volunteers will be held accountable for coming to their sessions. Clients will be encouraged to attend on a walk-in basis.

I also think it would help to encourage the HACSL and Literacy Action Center to meet with the Bennion Center to discuss the importance of prompt responses and encouragement for volunteers. I did not do a good job of stressing the importance of this to them, nor did I always adequately convey to volunteers when the HACSL was meeting to decide what to do next. Instead, I often waited to hear from them before contacting volunteers and in doing so, likely lost several volunteers. I will work with the new program director and the HACSL to ensure that this problem is corrected on both ends and that set structures are in place to quickly begin training volunteers.

I was also surprised by how much work the GED manual required. I had expected it to be a fairly easy project that wouldn't take a lot of time and would be completed by Christmas. However, at the same time as this project, I was also working 25 hours a week, working with two other Bennion Center Programs (Hospice Care and Service-Learning Scholars), volunteering for

two hospice companies, taking 5 classes, writing my Honors Thesis, interviewing for medical school and planning a wedding. I found that I was overwhelmed by everything else I was doing and had to mostly put the manual on hold after the first month of starting the program. Therefore, I did not complete the manual until April. I believe that it turned out well in the end, but given the chance to do it over again, I would have paced myself better and worked on it steadily throughout the year.

Overall, I am disappointed that the project was not as successful as I had hoped, but I am still hopeful that it will find its home in the Literacy Action Center.

References

Belzer, Alisa. (2004). "It's Not Like Normal School": The Role of Prior Learning Contexts in Adult Learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(1), 41-57

Gopalakrishnan, Ajit. (2008). Learner Retention in Adult Secondary Education: A Comparative Study. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*, 2(3), 140-149.

Siegel, Jill. (2007). Keeping It Real: Using Authentic Materials in a GED Class. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*, 1(2), 100-102.

Appendix A

Lowell Bennion Community Service Center Student Directed Program Proposal

Program Name: Salt Lake Housing Authority Family Self-Sufficiency **Date:** 7-29-2009

Agency Sponsor: Housing Authority of Salt Lake County

Address: 3595 South Main Street
City, State, Zip Salt Lake City, UT 84115

Telephone: Office: 801-284-4467 **Fax:**

Mobile:

E-mail address: wray@hacsl.org

Name of Contact Person: Wendy Ray

Is there a student or university community member already interested in directing the program?

Yes, Kelsey Buchman

1. Complete the following on a separate sheet:

A. Describe the community need or problem the program would address.

FSS is an employment program offered to families receiving housing assistance. It is designed to assist people in obtaining suitable employment that will enable them to move of government assistance programs. The final goal of the program is to find suitable employment for participants. Participants do so by working to increase their education by gaining GEDs and learning to cope with crisis situations. Obtaining education and employment allows participants to move toward homeownership, improved credit, family stability and a better life.

This program is essential to the community, as the job market becomes increasingly tight and competitive more and more families are forced into low income, government housing with no way to get out. This program will help people to further their education allowing them to get better jobs and move towards self sufficiency.

B. What are the goals of the program?

This program seeks to aid adults obtain GEDs and Higher Education degrees so that they are better able to succeed and compete in the job market and thus care for their families and become self sufficient.

C. How would these objectives be achieved?

Participants will work with counselors to create a self sufficiency plan. Case management services will provide career and educational assessments, employment workshops, GED and high school completion classes, life skills workshops, individual development accounts, clothing

for employment, information about community events, referrals to community resources and the opportunity to accumulate savings in escrow accounts.

These services will help provide individuals with the skills they need to succeed independently. Volunteers will be needed to help tutor adults as they prepare to take the GED or complete higher education courses. Volunteers will also be needed to assist families coping with crisis situations such as job loss, homelessness, abuse, etc.

D. How would the effectiveness of the program be evaluated?

The program will be evaluated by studying the number of families able to move out of government subsidized housing and into suitable employment as a result of this program. Also, the program will be monitored by considering the number of participants who successfully complete the program requirements, i.e. head of household must obtain suitable employment (usually defined as full-time) and maintain it for at least 6 consecutive months, all members of the household must be independent of cash welfare assistance (TANF) for at least 12 consecutive months, all goals and activities listed on the Individual Training and Services plan must be completed within the designated time frames, be in good standing with the Housing Authority and with the landlord, submit an application for final disbursement of the FSS escrow account. Participants who complete these tasks will be considered successful and their success is directly correlated to program success.

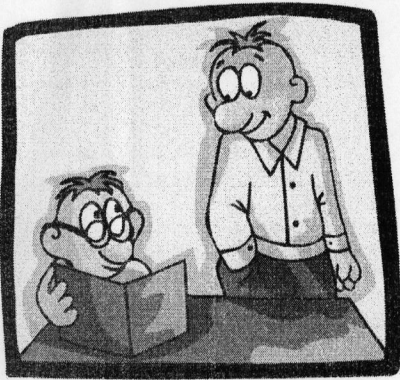
E. Describe the activities and responsibilities of volunteers and discuss the time commitments to which university volunteers would be asked to commit.

University volunteers will primarily be needed to help adults prepare for GED exams and higher education. Volunteers will be needed to help with college applications as well as GED preparatory work. Additionally volunteers will be needed to help develop the crisis management portion of the program, allowing for a wider range of services.

Volunteers will require criminal background checks (I'm guessing?) so a longer time commitment will be required, generally at least 6 months. Schedules will be somewhat flexible, generally volunteers will be needed in the afternoon or on weekends when participants are available – not working or engaged in educational programs.

F. Discuss the role a Bennion Center student program director would play in relation to your organization.

The Bennion Center program director would be expected to coordinate all University of Utah volunteers. He or she would provide introductory information to volunteers and assist in the establishment of a relationship with our organization. The program director would also play a role in developing the crisis management portion of this program and may be responsible for creating training materials for incoming volunteers.



Want to make a difference
in your community?

Need volunteer
or leadership experience?



Volunteer for the Family Self- Sufficiency Program!

The Family Self-Sufficiency Program is a program within the Housing Authority of the County of Salt Lake designed to help working adults get their GEDs. Volunteers are needed to help tutor in basic math skills - primarily algebra and pre-algebra. Additionally, volunteers are also needed to help develop the program and create study manuals for participants.

Contact Kelsey Buchman for more information
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